

June 7/8, 2008

*Walking in the Truth Series*

## **Power Struggles**

**3 John 9-15**

Pastor Bryan Clark

My first church out of seminary, actually my only other church besides this one, was in a wonderful ranching, farming community in the central part of the state. For Patti and me it was a wonderful experience. We had the opportunity to serve with some of the most wonderful Christian people that we have known, and many of them continue to be dear friends to this day. But the initial year and a half was a bit rough.

I came out of seminary I would say extremely naïve in terms of some of the dynamics of church and leadership and what really transpires. I went to Broken Bow as a youth pastor with some other miscellaneous duties, and I remember when we had our first interview. I remember coming out of that and saying to Patti as we were driving home, "You know, what a nice group of people. It's clear the pastor doesn't fit in, but they try so hard to make him fit in." Well, looking back, there were red flags everywhere but I'm thinking, "*Well, this is church. These are all Christians. What could possibly go wrong?*"

We were there about a month, about 30 days, and I remember going home one day for lunch and saying to Patti, "We are in the middle of a mess." And we were. We were in the middle of what I would refer to as a leadership vacuum. There simply was no leadership. The pastor was very insecure and this created a very difficult environment.

What I've learned over the years is anytime there's a leadership vacuum, there are always people willing to step into that vacuum. Typically it's more than one person or family, which then creates a power struggle. Then people begin to divide and take sides, and pretty soon the whole thing comes crashing down.

The first 12, 13 months of my time in Broken Bow was really a class on leadership; it just was a class on bad leadership. But I really saw the effects of a lack of leadership and poor leadership. Eventually the church kind of disintegrated. It split three different directions and I was left with the remnant that stayed with the home campus. I was asked to stay there and we ended up staying there for the next nine years with really a wonderful group of people.

Over the years, one of the things I've learned about leadership is your style of leadership, the way you lead, needs to be relevant to the circumstances and the environment in which you lead. I think the very best of spiritual leadership is leadership that is willing to unleash, willing to empower, willing to create an environment where everyone can flourish according to their talents and their calling from God.

But I've also learned over the years that I can't give away influence that I don't have. I can't give away power that I don't have. I can't unleash something that I don't have leashed. So the first step of leadership is to gain trust, it's to gain influence, it's to try to reach a point where you have some degree of leadership and credibility.

That's where you reach, then, the critical point. Once you reach a point where you have a degree of power, you have a degree of influence, you have a position of trust; the critical moment, then, is what do I do with that? In my opinion, this is where a lot of leaders get into trouble. Will I use that to try to address my own insecurities and the need to be somebody? Will I use that to try to build my own kingdom and create some sort of a personality cult? Or will I use that for the good of the body? Will I give it away? Will I give away power? Will I give away influence? Will I unleash the many talented people and leaders around me?—which is what I would consider to be a biblical model of leadership.

Jesus is the head. We're all called to be members of the body. The best environment in any church is when everyone in the body has the freedom to be what God has called them to be. I would say that's the environment that we strive for here. But I've also learned over the years that there is a downside to such leadership, and the downside is there will always be those people that perceive that form of leadership to be a vacuum, and in that vacuum they will seek to make their move.

If those in leadership are dictators, if they are those that are going to demonstrate their power and remind people *I'm in control*, it is a worse environment but it is less likely that those people are going to step forward and make some sort of a power move. The downside of a biblical form of leadership is you're always going to have people that misunderstand that. That's nothing new. The church has struggled with that for 2000 years.

That's exactly what John is battling in the church that he addresses in 3 John. If you have a Bible, I invite you to turn with us to 3 John. Last week we talked about the first half of this letter that was written to a member of the church by the name of Gaius, who was walking in the truth, who was a wonderful model of what a Christian should be, and Paul encourages him. But beginning in verse 9 he has to deal with a problem person in the church. He says:

**I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.** (\*NASB 3 John 9)

There's a lot in verse 9 that we need to talk about there. First of all, what did John write to the church? Some people think it was 2 John, although that seems highly unlikely. It seems more likely it was just a letter that maybe addressed some concerns, maybe addressed some challenges. Was John asserting some level of authority in the church? Now whether it's the apostle Paul, whether it's Peter, whether it's John, we know for a fact that they all wrote multiple letters to these churches. There's just a handful of them that were inspired Scripture.

So it wouldn't be hard to imagine that John wrote a letter to the church in order to lead it and guide it as an apostle. But a person by the name of Diotrephes decides he doesn't agree with John. So he clearly "does not accept what we say." It could even be translated "does not accept us."

Now exactly who is Diotrephes and what did he do? It could have been anything from he forbid the letter to be read to the congregation, to the fact that the letter was read but he clearly voiced his opposition; he clearly voiced his disagreement.

We don't really know a lot about Diotrephes. What we do know can be surmised from his name. I mentioned last week that the name Gaius was probably the most popular name in the Roman kingdom. As common as Gaius was, so Diotrephes is rare—an extremely rare name. The name itself means "Zeus-reared," in other words, "from the gods."

The only type of a family that would have dared name a child such a name would have been a family of significant influence, a family of significance: significant wealth, significant influence, a mover, a shaker, somebody in the community that was viewed to be kind of the best of the best. They would probably have what it takes to name their son "from the gods." So we would know this is a family that's used to having a significant amount of influence. They're used to being looked up to. They're used to having their way.

Diotrephes was raised in that environment and probably was just used to getting whatever he wanted, used to having his own way, used to a significant amount of influence. What we do know for sure is what John says, "He loved to be first among them."

Now that's a very interesting phrase. What he is saying is he loved to have his way. He loved to be "the guy." He loved to be the center of attention. He loved to be the one that called the shots. He was in charge. You could see where if he was raised in such an environment where that is all he's ever known, then that's what he comes to expect. That's his identity. That's what he comes to love. And John identifies this guy *loves to be first among them*. Therefore, he's rather resentful of the fact that John the apostle is trying to assert his authority. He doesn't want John to be in charge; *he's* in charge. He doesn't want John to call the shots; *he's* going to call the shots.

You have to remember, John isn't just some Joe down the street writing a letter. This is the apostle John. This is John as in Peter, James and John. This is the last living apostle. You know, the New Testament church did go through a bit of a struggle when the apostles all died off and the next generation of leaders was raised up. There was a bit of a challenge as to who was in charge and who was leading. You can kind of feel the beginning of that here. Diotrephes clearly asserts himself as the one who is in charge, not John.

Now it's interesting to think about the relevance of the environment in which Diotrephes grew up and how that affected his heart, how that affected who he was as a person, and how that affected his ability to function in a very different value system—in a value system of grace where God says there is not rich or poor; there are not those who have it and those who don't; there are not those who are more important than others. It's a completely different value system than what is embraced in the world. But when Diotrephes got in that culture, all he knew was that he loved to be first. That begins to create this division and tension.

Stop and think about the environment in which we live all week long—in a value system that is embraced by the world—and then stepping into an environment that's very different with a very different value system. It can be quite a challenge for some people.

Think about the environment that we were in when we were in Broken Bow. I'll preface this by saying farmers and ranchers are very high on my list of people I highly respect. In my time there I was astonished over and over again at the level of intelligence and the level of diversity of ability it takes to be a successful rancher or farmer. So my respect for them is way up there.

But think about the world they live in every single day. They run their own show. They call their own shots. They decide every day what they're going to do, how they're going to do it, when they're going to do it and why they're going to do it. They're fiercely independent people. It's not a bad thing; it's what makes them good at what they do. That's why they do what they do. They really don't want people telling them what to do.

But it can be very difficult for people that live in that world all day long to step into a world where they're not in charge, into a world where they're not calling the shots, into a world where somebody else is in charge and they're expected to be submissive and surrender to that. So it makes a lot of rural churches very difficult to lead.

As a matter of fact, typically what you have in those churches is a family or two that have been in the community for generations. They're people of significant resources; they're people of significant influence. They have influence at the bank; they have influence in the school system; they have influence in the café; they have influence at the John Deere dealership. They're people of significant influence because of their family name in the community and they become very used to the fact that they have influence and they run the show and they call the shots.

Oftentimes you have one or two families in those rural churches that run the show. They have the money; they have the influence. Oftentimes if you disagree with them in a meeting about the color of carpet, that may come to affect something when you're trying to get your next farm loan or something else in the community.

The dynamics get very difficult, and sometimes over time, like Diotrephes, they find that in their heart they love to be first. They love to flex their muscles; they love to be in charge. And they, for the most part, run the show. Pastors are hired to be the hired man, but at the end of the day there's a handful of families that, if they need to, they will flex their muscles and remind you they're in charge. Now in Broken Bow we had many, many, many farmers and ranchers that had humble hearts and served the church faithfully. It was actually a wonderful environment there. But in many, many, many rural churches that's the problem.

Now that's kind of my way of gently stepping into our environment. We sit there and say, "Yeah, those farmers and ranchers." So let's talk about you and me. Let's think about our world, those of you that are out in the marketplace, business owners, where you're used to running the show. You call the shots. You hire; you fire; you set the vision; you set the direction; you do what you want. There's nothing wrong with that. That's part of how God has wired you. That makes you very good at what you do.

But the danger is over time you don't realize what's happened to your heart is that you love to be first. You love to run the show. You love to call the shots. And when you get into an environment where you're not in charge and you're not running the show and you're not setting the vision, it can be very hard. It can be very hard to be submissive and surrender to that, because what you don't realize over time is you love to be first.

It's easy for people to come up with lots of excuses for why it doesn't work for them to serve on a team or to be part of the body and to serve in some significant way. But at the end of the day it's possible that there's a heart problem.

Think about professionals that are doctors and lawyers and executives, who all week long they give orders and people do what they say. They're in charge and everybody knows it, and they're just used to always having their way. They don't really know what to do with people that disagree with them or have a different opinion. And then they come into an environment like this where they're really not somebody—where we want to value the person in the parking lot just as much as the one that preaches the sermon—and it's a very different economy.

You get on a team and you state your opinion, but you don't get your way. Somebody else gets their way because your team doesn't really agree with you. Suddenly there's something that wells up in your heart. You can have lots of excuses for why that doesn't really fit for you, but at the end of the day it's possible—I'm just saying it's possible—that over time you've loved to be first and run the show and always get your way. And you just don't know what to do with an environment when that doesn't happen.

Now as I mentioned last week, we have many, many, many business owners, doctors, lawyers, people that are in leadership positions that serve very faithfully every week. But there are, I'm sure, also those of you that struggle to figure out where you fit in the body of Christ. I'm suggesting it's just possible that over time something has happened to your heart, and you need to examine: *Is it possible I really love to be first and I don't know what to do with an environment when I don't get to be in charge?* That's a heart problem. That's exactly what's happening here to Diotrephes. So what do we do? Verse 10:

**For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.**

John, the apostle of love, is saying, "Because of this problem, if I come I'm going to have to publicly confront Diotrephes." That's what he's saying: "I'm going to have to call him out; because if we don't stop him, he will ultimately divide and destroy the church."

Studying through what he says in verse 10 is so interesting because it's as if it was written yesterday. Apparently whether you're talking about this problem 2000 years ago or this problem today, the methodology, the pattern is as predictable as the sunrise, and that's exactly what he's identifying.

What is the problem? What are his deeds? First of all, "he unjustly accuses us." The words *unjustly accuse* mean literally "incoherent babble." We might say today "baseless charges or false charges." In other words, Diotrephes is going to begin to say things about John and his leadership team that simply aren't true. He's going to shade the truth just a little bit in order to make his position look a little better and the position of John look a little bit weaker.

But over time, the more he shares the story, the more the truth begins to be lost in the discussion. And the more he begins to present the material in such a way that he appears to be the victim and the leaders appear to be the bad guys, pretty soon he doesn't even know what's true anymore and you get this war of words. It starts with one person; then it's three people; then it's five people; then it's ten people. That's how these things always work. So that's the first thing that John is saying. It starts with this campaign of words, unfairly representing what has taken place.

People tend to say, "Well, you know, it's not that big a deal." Well, John calls them "wicked words." "And not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church." Clearly, Diotrephes has influence—whether he's the pastor, whether he's an elder, or whether he's simply a member of the church with significant influence—it's reached the point now where he has drawn a line in the sand. And when John sends his missionaries that we talked about last week to proclaim truth to the church,

Diotrephes says, "You know, they can't stay with me. I'm not going to help them; I'm not going to house them; I'm not going to feed them; I'm not going to support them in any way—because I think John is wrong and I don't think John is in charge."

But it goes beyond that to where he says to others in the church, "You're going to have to make a decision. Are you with John or are you with me? Because if you choose to show hospitality to John's guys, you're out."

That's probably why the first half of the letter was written to Gaius to encourage him. He's probably one of the few, if not the only, that is receiving John's missionaries, that is showing them hospitality, that is giving them what they need to go on their way—because obviously Diotrephes has a significant amount of influence and he has drawn his line in the sand.

That's where these types of situations get so destructive, is after a war of words, it moves into the taking of sides. *Hey, are you with me or not? Are you with me or are you with them? Which side are you on?* And pretty soon you start to get these divisions, and if it isn't stopped it's going to ultimately split the church apart and everybody loses. Verse 11:

**Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.**

I think the danger is to adopt the methodology of the person that you're struggling with. In other words, John's concern is that Gaius adopt the methodology of Diotrephes and start to get into this power war that ultimately nobody wins. So he says, "Imitate what's good, not what is evil. If you imitate what's good, that looks like Jesus. If you imitate what's evil, it looks like somebody who has never seen God." That's John's language for those who don't really know Jesus and don't look like Jesus.

Now here's the challenge in these kinds of situations. You have someone who is telling you this is a problem. And you don't know is that the truth or is this a misrepresentation of the truth? Sometimes the problem is the person in the pew. But sometimes the problem may be the pastor and the leadership, such as the situation in Broken Bow. The problem was the pastor. So you have two people pointing their fingers at each other and you're supposed to figure out which one is right before God.

I can imagine Diotrephes sitting in a service like this, listening to this entire message, and he would agree with every single word. He would be in a hundred percent agreement with everything I've said. The only thing would be he would think of himself as John and he would think of me, or whoever the problem is with, as the Diotrephes. He just flips it upside-down. *Yeah, I'm the victim; he's the problem. We need to deal with this.* And you're left with this stalemate: two people pointing fingers at each other, figuring out which one is right before God.

Well, John actually gives us some very practical help with that. He introduces us to a third player by the name of Demetrius. Verse 12:

**Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself; and we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.**

Basically, he gives three things to think about there. Number one, he's talking about reputation. Demetrius is probably a missionary sent from John, very likely delivered 2 and 3 John together, and is then a representation of John and is probably representing some of these conflicts that John is talking about.

So he says, "Well, the first thing you do is you check out reputation. Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone." Typically, people's behavior tends to be habitual. It tends to be a pattern. So you need to investigate beyond the "he said/she said" or beyond the finger pointing, to what is the pattern of behavior of this person. Is this kind of a pattern of behavior in his or her life? So you investigate.

We all understand that as a pastor I can stand up here and I can claim anything. I can claim I'm the nicest guy on the face of the planet. You would expect me to say such things, but how do you know it's true?

We've told you many times, and I'll remind you again this morning, we have no problem with you investigating. You are free to talk to anyone on the staff. Let's just take me personally. We have about 70 employees. You're free to talk to any of the facility people. You're free to talk to any of the ladies that work in the office. You're free to talk to any of our ministry staff. I serve on a number of teams with lay people. You're free to talk to anybody. Ask them the questions, you know, "Is Bryan some sort of a power maniac? Is he a control freak? Is he a power monger? What's up with this guy?" If people say things to you, you're free to investigate that. That's good accountability for us, and we have no problem with that. That's true of any of the ministry staff. Feel free to ask anybody you want.

But if you're going to do that, you need to also do the same for the person that's making the accusation. What is this person's habit? What is this person's pattern? What does this look like? Is this the third, the fourth, the fifth church where this has happened? Does this appear to be a pattern? Does this appear to be a bit of a problem? What do other people around this person say? So investigate both sides. It's very helpful. Typically you'll find a pattern on one side or the other.

Second of all, he says "a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself." What he's meaning there is that the truth does define behavior that is right or appropriate and behavior that's very inappropriate. So you start to look - what are the biblical principles and are people acting in accordance with those? The truth then becomes kind of the measuring rod.

For example, the Bible is very clear you're not to make an accusation against a pastor or an elder without two or three witnesses to the offense. If you have a problem with anyone, you're not supposed to go to other people in the body. You're supposed to go to them. Those are principles that are very clearly laid out. That's appropriate behavior.

So if you find somebody that has you cornered in the hallway and they're dumping the load about one of the leaders, immediately you would know that is a violation of biblical principle. That alone should tell you something's probably wrong here. There are right ways to deal with disagreement and there are wrong ways. Someone once said, "A person will construct a theology to fit his morality."

What I've found over the years is people like Diotrephes reconstruct their theology to justify their methodology. For some reason, those biblical principles don't apply to them in this situation, and

they have very spiritualized reasons why. But you need to put truth up here and say, "Is this the appropriate way to deal with this?" So that's what he's saying, "Check out reputation and patterns. Look at the truth itself. Is this going according to biblical principle?"

Thirdly, John puts himself forth in essence as a reference. John is saying to Gaius, "I've sent Demetrius. And Gaius, you know me. You know my character; you know my passion for Jesus. Therefore, because you know me, you need to know that I'm putting my stamp of approval on Demetrius."

That can actually be very helpful. Find someone that you trust—someone that is outside the circle of conflict, someone whose judgment you would trust, who knows whoever the person is in question—and ask that person, "You know, there seems to be this conflict going on. What do you know about this person?"

I actually do that quite a bit. Someone will bring something about somebody that I don't really know. So I'll find someone that I trust their judgment, who knows that person well, and I will say, "This is what I'm hearing. What do you know? What is your judgment?" I'm looking for a reliable reference who can help me sort this out.

Three very practical things—when you find yourself kind of stuck in the middle of one of those—do some investigating. Find out what are the patterns, what's the history, what's the reputation? Second of all, what are the biblical principles and are they being followed or are they being violated? And thirdly, find someone that you trust and you trust their judgment, that would have more information than you do on the situation, and ask them relevant questions. Verse 13:

**I had many things to write to you, but I am not willing to write them to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face. Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.** (vs. 13-15)

Third John ends pretty much like 2 John ended as well. Over the years, what I have found is even though the church is the church, we're still made up of people; and you're always going to have people from time to time that emerge, trying to move into what they perceive to be a power vacuum or a leadership vacuum. If ignored, they continue to talk, they continue to recruit. Eventually, it creates significant division in the church.

John puts forth Gaius as a model of what it means to walk in the truth. But he also puts Diotrephes forth as a reminder that there's always going to be the potential of such people and they need to be dealt with.

One of the things that excites me a lot about our church and where we're at today would be our staff, our ministry staff, and the leaders within the body that God has brought forth. We really have a tremendous group of leaders and ministry staff, men and women who are very capable, who have a heart for Jesus. When I travel out and about to other churches, one of the things that impresses me again and again is that God has brought to us a very capable staff.

One of the things I've learned over the years is the only way that you can keep very capable leaders is if you turn them loose and unleash them. If you try to control them, if you try to reel them in, if you try to put them in a box, the only ones you're going to keep are your least effective leaders. But

those that God has really called to lead, you have to release them. You have to unleash them. You have to turn them loose and let them do their thing.

That's the kind of environment we're trying to create, where everyone is free to reach their potential according to how God has wired them and how God has called them. But in such an environment there is always going to be someone who loves to be first, who is going to emerge in that environment and take advantage of opportunities to begin to build his or her own kingdom and begin to try to create conflict and dissention and divide the church.

Nobody likes to deal with those things. But they do have to be dealt with, just as John says, in order to protect the environment for everyone and in order to accomplish the mission that God has given us.

*Father, we are thankful for many, many, many who are like Gaius that walk in the truth and serve so faithfully. Lord, I think this is an environment where many, many, many people can be turned loose, can be unleashed, can be empowered to fulfill their calling. But, Lord, we understand in such an environment there is always going to be the potential of a Diotrephes, who loves to be first, who loves to run the show and call the shots, who is going to emerge with the potential of doing significant damage. Lord, I pray that You would give us the courage to respond rightly but also to respond in such a way that we as leaders might protect the environment where others can be unleashed, can be empowered to fulfill their calling. Lord, ultimately we pray that You would keep us unified, that You would keep us focused on that which You've called us to do. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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## **Power Struggles**

### **III John 9-15**

Pastor Bryan Clark

## **Opening Discussion**

1. Have you ever been in an environment where there was a leadership vacuum? What happened?
2. Does a team-based environment mean no one really leads? Why or why not?
3. Do you think people who are used to being “in charge” and having people do what they’re told may struggle in environments where they are not in charge? In what way might this be a heart check?
4. Do you think a good leader will work hard to gain influence in order to create an environment where that influence can be given away to others? Why or why not?
5. Why do churches seem to be a common place to bring out the “Diotrephes” in us?

## **Bible Study**

1. Read III John 9-15. Summarize the issue discussed in verses 9-10. What do we know about Diotrephes simply based on his name? Do you think his background contributed to his “love to be first?”
2. In what ways can our backgrounds, jobs, family dynamics contribute to how we respond to those in authority?
3. Have you ever been in a church where certain people or families ran the show? What was the result? How can this be avoided?
4. How does John intend to handle the situation? What is Diotrephes methodology for discrediting John? Have you experienced such behavior in a church? What was the result?
5. What is the “test” for that which is good behavior according to verses 11-12? Put this in practical terms. If someone is spreading inflammatory words about a leader or someone in authority, how do you know who is doing the right thing according to these verses?

What should you do if “Diotrephes” comes to you with unjust accusations about those in leadership? Are these “wicked words” or just his opinion?

## Application

1. None of us want to be a Diotrephes, yet often we can become self-deceived and convince ourselves our little crusade is justified and the right thing to do. How can we make sure we respond rightly when we disagree and avoid “wicked words” that divide?
2. What role can your group members play in keeping one another on track?
3. It’s always easy to come up with a long list of reasons why we don’t serve in church but more times than not those excuses are simply distraction from the real issue which is having a heart like Diotrephes which loves to be first. If we can’t have our way we’ll take our toys and go home. How do we avoid having such a heart so that we serve like Gaius or Demetrius?